PHILANTHROPY AND GUIDANCE, 1924-1934

The potential of park museums, particularly as instruments of outdoor education, captured the interest of several very able men in the 1920s. Their leadership and support transformed the scattered beginnings outlined above into an integrated chain of museums uniquely adapted to a defined purpose. What started as largely individual efforts by devoted amateurs to meet evident needs became a coordinated professional enterprise. These leaders moved the National Park Service program into the mainstream of American museum activity. They endowed it with a body of creative concepts, standards of practice, central direction, and a growing staff trained to develop and operate museums. This phase of Park Service curatorial history, largely financed by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, culminated in the organization of the Museum Division in 1935. Its initial catalyst was Yosemite National Park naturalist Ansel Hall.

The Yosemite Museum

The High Sierra encounter of Ansel Hall and Francis Farquhar with the Hamlin party on August 27, 1921, may have been entirely fortuitous, although the party had apparently visited Yosemite briefly and met Hall en route to Sequoia Hall and Farquhar evidently knew whose camp they were approaching. As Chauncey Hamlin remembered the occasion years later, he heard a voice calling out of the twilight, "Mr. Hamlin! Mr. Hamlin!" He then saw the two men coming toward the campfire. Hamlin did not recall that Hall expounded his hopes for a Yosemite museum better than the Jorgensen studio during their conversation that evening, but he opened doors and made an impression.[1] The nature of the man who in due course reacted to the impression is significant to the results.

Chauncey Jerome Hamlin, born in Buffalo in 1881, inherited adequate means to pursue his interests. At Yale he played football and won election to Phi Beta Kappa. Graduating in 1903, he studied law at Buffalo and was admitted to the bar in 1905. He went to the Mexican border with his National Guard regiment in 1916, rose to captain, and accompanied the regiment to France in 1918. Back in Buffalo in 1919 he decided that rather than reopen his law practice he would devote himself to some form of public service. His father-in-law, David Gray, had been a founder of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences, and Hamlin had served briefly on its board of managers before his mobilization. He resumed his seat, and the next year the society elected him president. He held the office 28 years during which he gave much of his time and some half-million dollars to the society's major undertaking, the Buffalo Museum of Science.[2]

Chauncey J. Hamlin. As president of the American Association of Museums, he secured funding and organized projects to demonstrate the potential of park museums. (Courtesy Buffalo Museum of Science.)

Hamlin also became interested in parks. In 1920 he and his wife bought forty acres in the Giant Forest at Sequoia for donation to the park. If the Hamlins had not already met Stephen T. Mather, they soon did. Within a few months Director Mather paid a brief visit to Buffalo and declared the exhibits he saw in the society's museum "wonderfully informative."[3] Mather also lent his support to the creation of Allegany State Park, in which Hamlin was deeply involved. The Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences published in its magazine articles by Mather and Farquhar on the

proposed Sequoia-Roosevelt National Park, then made a nationwide distribution of reprints as a favor to the Park Service.[4] Ansel Hall happened upon fertile ground well prepared for sowing the seed of his Yosemite Museum dream.

Hamlin did not forget about Yosemite's museum needs in the two years following his meeting with Hall. A personal matter took precedence, however. After the Hamlins' son graduated from preparatory school in 1923, his parents felt that he should travel extensively in Europe before entering college. They needed a suitable companion for him and picked Hall. Given a leave of absence from the Park Service, Hall left Yosemite at the end of August 1923 and did not return to the park until the following August. In his absence Hamlin marshaled support for the Yosemite museum project.[5]

Having become a member of the American Association of Museums in 1921, Hamlin found himself promptly made a vice president and chairman of the committee on association finances. Within two years he secured a matching grant that enabled the AAM to set up a permanent paid staff with offices in space offered rent-free by the Smithsonian Institution. After the association elected him its president in 1923, he had a strategic base for rallying supporters of museums in parks.

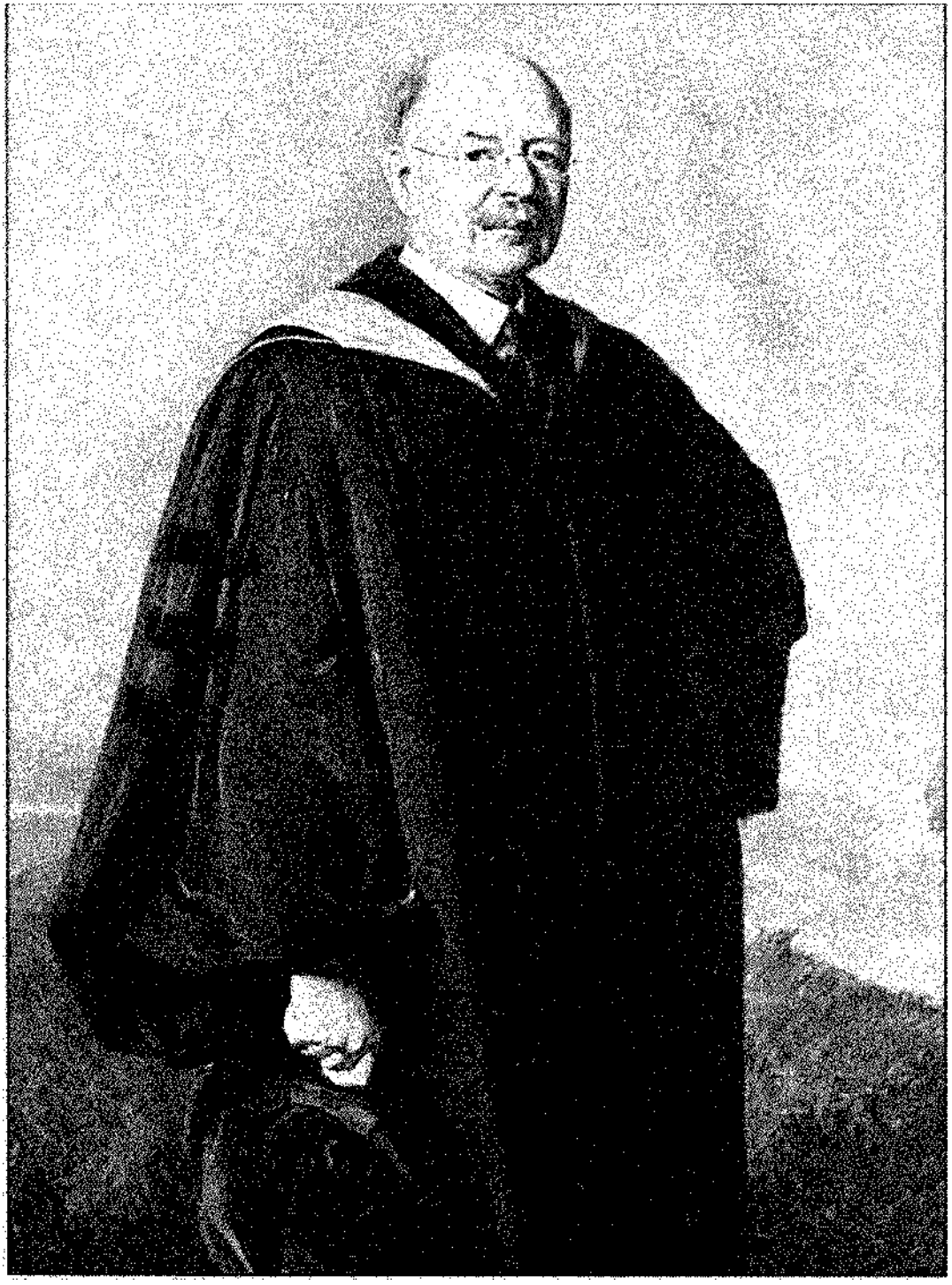
Association business took Hamlin to the offices of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial. While sitting with its director waiting for some papers to be fetched, he spoke casually of Yosemite's museum needs. To his surprise the director expressed interest. Hamlin went straight back to Washington and set up an AAM Committee on Museums in National Parks, later called the Committee on Outdoor Education, with himself as chairman. Its membership included directors, curators, and scholars highly respected in the scientific world and the museum profession. The Park Service was to become particularly indebted to several of the members, including Hermon C. Bumpus, John C. Merriam, and Clark Wissler. The committee weighed the educational potential of the national parks "and developed certain concrete plans looking toward the establishment of small natural-history museums in a number of the larger parks."[6]

The AAM presented these proposals to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial and secured two grants. One in the amount of $5,000 enabled the committee to continue its work. The other, for $70,500, was designated to build and equip a museum for Yosemite as an experiment and example of the committee's ideas. Hamlin radioed the good news to Ansel Hall in July 1924 as the ship carrying him and young Chan Hamlin approached New York. He then appointed Hall executive agent of the AAM for the Yosemite project.[7] Hall was sent first to Duxbury, Massachusetts, to the home of Hermon Bumpus, who discussed plans and gave him explicit instructions on what to do as a start.

Bumpus, who would provide the creative leadership for the Yosemite venture and monitor the quality of the work, was in active retirement at the age of 62. The descendant of an old New England family, he was already an ardent naturalist during his boyhood in suburban Boston and rural Maine. While an undergraduate at Brown University, he worked as an assistant in the university museum and made drawings to illustrate scientific papers. In 1886 he became the first professor of biology at Olivet College. After teaching there three years and developing a departmental museum, he enrolled at Clark University and received the first Ph.D. degree it granted. Brown called him to a professorship in 1890, a position he held until 1900. In 1895 the federal government asked him to take over the moribund Bureau of Fisheries laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, which he swiftly revitalized. His work in marine biology exhibited his capacity for well-conceived research along fresh lines and his marked ingenuity in the promotion and management of worthwhile projects.[8]

Bumpus spent 1900-10 at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. He went there with a dual appointment as curator of invertebrates and special assistant to the museum's president, Morris K. Jesup. Jesup, a wealthy railroad developer, turned much of the day-to-day management over to Bumpus along with the newly established office of museum director. Bumpus gave particular attention to the museum's exhibits, undertaking to transform the massive displays of study series, orderly but uninterpreted, to attractive presentations of ideas aimed to interest and educate the layman. "The exhibits in an institution of this nature should be made primarily for presenting in an ample manner various scientific subjects and not for the mere exhibition of specimens," he wrote. "The exhaustive collection of specimens belongs more to the workroom, where they should be available to visiting scientists. The so-called exhibition halls should be jealously preserved for imparting information and the specimens carefully selected." He also wrote: "There was a time when curators felt that an intelligible label was an administrative blunder. . . . The idea that a museum exists in order that certain collections may be exhibited has been found fallacious. It assumed that the specimen was of more value than the visitor; that the institution existed for things rather than for human beings."[9]

As a biologist and teacher good with his hands and experienced in scientific illustration, Bumpus was well equipped to tackle exhibit problems at both theoretical and practical levels. Colleagues gave him principal credit for the Northwest Coast Indian hall, an important breakthrough in display concepts. They also referred to him as originator of the curved background that added so much to the illusion of reality in habitat groups. He recruited preparators who would raise the artistic quality of exhibits and sent them on scientific expeditions to ensure the accuracy of their creations.



Hermon Carey Bumpus. A founding father of museum curatorship in the National Park Service. (Courtesy Brown University.)